Part 1

To make the team, a player must show something beyond the stat sheet. Similar to TSN broadcaster Pierre McGuire's annual “Monsters Team,” the Prime Cuts squad is chalk-full of intangibles such as heart, determination, hockey IQ, two-way play, grit, and clutch scoring ability. Most of the players on this squad are also under appreciated (in both fantasy and real hockey circles). There are obviously some big stars on this team – the usual suspects – but there are also some under-the-radar players who you may not have noticed this season.

The Second Pairing: Keith Ballard and Mark Streit

It is rare that the top defenseman on the NHL's worst club is getting Norris attention, but that is exactly the case with Mark Streit on Long Island. Streit was cast off by Montreal who figured their power play could survive without him (it hasn't), and that they wouldn't miss him (they have). He has brought stability to a very young and volatile defensive group in New York. Streit is a mind-boggling plus-8, on a team that features some impressive golf scores (Brenden Witt with a Tiger Woods-like minus-33, and Radek Martinek at minus-16). Streit is an offensive catalyst as well. If the Islanders make some smart signings, and Rick DiPietro is healthy, look for them to surprise next season. Streit will be the focal point of any Long Island resurgence, and if he keeps playing this well, things are looking up. Streit was on the Prime Cuts roster last year as well. Many predicted that Streit's fantasy value would disappear with his decision to leave Montreal for New York, but his numbers are the same (and in the case of goals even better), and his overall game has developed leaps and bounds. It is tough to give the Norris to a defenseman on such a poor club, but Streit should get a nomination at the very least.

The Phoenix Coyotes already rue the day that they gave up heart-and-soul defenseman Keith Ballard for the extremely disappointing Olli Jokinen. Jokinen has been solid as a Flame, which makes you question the Coyotes coaching staff.... On to Ballard: he is a physical, mobile, aggressive two-way defenseman who has added a lot to an already impressive defensive group in Florida. He leads the Panthers defense in plus/minus with a solid plus-10, and he is third in scoring with 31 points (behind Jay Bouwmeester and Bryan McCabe). Ballard will become even more important to the Panthers if Bouwmeester skips town this summer, like many people are predicting. Ballard brings a bit of a defensive presence on this pairing, allowing Streit to take some risks offensively. Defensemen who can defend as well as move the puck are so valuable in today's game, and Ballard is the perfect example of that. I am not sure what the Panthers plan on doing with their captaincy, but Ballard would be my choice to don the “C” in Florida.

The Third Line: David Booth, Ryan Kesler, and David Backes

The third unit features three players who are not third liners on their respective clubs, but all three play an intense, energetic two-way game representative of a third line role. This line may not just be a fantasy line put together by yours truly, but a unit iced by Team USA at the 2010 Olympics in Vancouver. I'll start with David Booth, or Zach Parise-lite as I have dubbed him (or Sidney Crosby-lite-lite, whatever works for you). Booth broke out last season with 22 goals in 73 games, surpassing his career high of 17 (a number he most recently hit back in 2003 with the Michigan State Spartans). Booth is on pace to come close to 30 goals this season, and has both the most consistent and the most dangerous Panther all season. He isn't a lock for the 2010 team yet, but I would be shocked if he wasn't on the final roster. He plays the game with endless energy, he creates offense on his own, and I have never seen him mail a shift in or not finish a play hard before. He was an honorable mention on the Prime Cuts squad last season, but Booth earned a spot this time around through his combination of will and skill (a phrase you will see again).

Centering the third line is Ryan Kesler, back for his second stint as the Prime Cuts checking pivot. Kesler has actually been playing right-wing with the Canucks ever since Mats Sundin

signed, but he is most valuable at center. Kesler has emerged as a premier two-way threat this season, and much like Booth had a 20 goal campaign in 2007-2008 out of nowhere. He possesses that rare ability to consistently make a difference defensively and offensively, like Mike Peca and Rod Brind'Amour used to do earlier on in their careers. Kesler has also emerged as a dominant face-off man, a requirement for any elite checking center. He should be up for Selke contention this season, but the award is usually given out on reputation, something that takes a while to develop. Kesler is a lock for the American Olympic squad, and if he keeps developing offensively like he has playing with Sundin and Pavol Demitra, it may not be in a purely defensive role. He has 33 points in 31 games since Sundin joined the Canucks, after putting up 20 points through the first 41 games. Kesler has benefited from an offensive role (as the stats show), but he has also taken advantage of a great opportunity. More often than not this season Kesler has been the most noticeable skater on the ice for either team. The points are still secondary though for Kesler, and that is why he is the perfect checking center.

At right wing is perhaps the breakout player this season in the NHL, rugged Blues winger David Backes. Many were surprised (and a few in St. Louis upset) when the Canucks made Backes a very rich man with a three-year, $7.5-million offer sheet last summer. The Blues matched, and at the time it represented a significant raise for the former college star. Backes has shown that the Canucks knew what they were doing. He has helped fill the void up front in St. Louis left by several significant injuries to players like Paul Kariya and Andy McDonald. Backes has also been a star in fantasy circles, combining solid production (on pace for 50 points) with a physical streak (already over 150 penalty minutes for the season). The Blues have tried him at center where he performed very well, but with his forechecking ability and combination of speed and size, he is most effective barreling down the right wing.